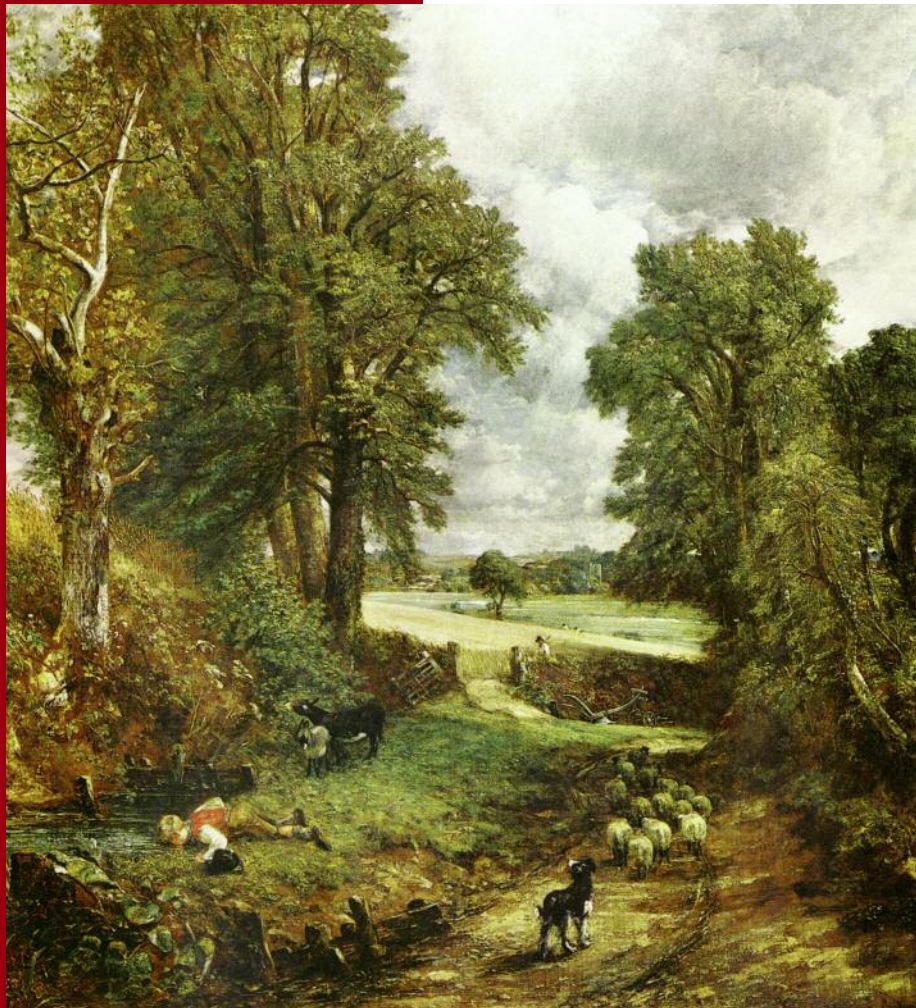


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HEAVEN IN A WILD FLOWER: THE BRITISH ROMANTIC POETS COURSE GUIDE



Professor Adam Potkay
COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

Heaven in a Wild Flower

The British Romantic Poets

Professor Adam Potkay
The College of William and Mary



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Heaven in a Wild Flower:
The British Romantic Poets
Professor Adam Potkay



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About Your Professor

Adam Potkay

Adam Potkay is a professor of English at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, and a recipient of a 2009 Plumeri Award for Faculty Excellence. In August 2009, he was designated William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Humanities. In 1996, Professor Potkay and his wife and fellow College of William and Mary professor Monica Brzezinski Potkay were jointly honored with the College of William and Mary's Alumni Fellowship Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Professor Potkay has also been a visiting professor at Columbia University and at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. He received his B.A. from Cornell University (1982), an M.A. from Johns Hopkins University (1986), and his Ph.D. from Rutgers University (1990).

A distinguished scholar of eighteenth-century literature and culture, Professor Potkay has published works that include *The Passion for Happiness: Samuel Johnson and David Hume* (Cornell University Press, 2000) and *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Cornell University Press, 1994). He is the coeditor (with Sandra Burr) of a collection of autobiographies and sermons by some of the earliest black writers in English, *Black Atlantic Writers of the Eighteenth Century: Living the New Exodus in England and the Americas* (St. Martin's Press, 1995). He has published scholarly articles and more popular essays in a wide variety of journals, from *18th-Century Studies* and *Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* to *Philosophy Now* and *Raritan Quarterly*.

Professor Potkay was recently named a co-winner of the Harry Levin Prize awarded by the American Comparative Literature Association for his book *The Story of Joy: From the Bible to Late Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). *The Story of Joy* outlines an intellectual and literary history of joy, especially the treatments of joy in literature, philosophy, and religion, with an emphasis on British and German works from the Reformation through the Romantic period.



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Introduction

British Romantic poetry is, first and foremost, about how we see or perceive the world. It thus offers the possibility of a *new world* in seeing the world anew. The Romantic poets offer glimpses of a world in which the things of nature take on a supernatural gleam, or, conversely, in which supernatural things, such as spirits and magical forces, seem a part of nature. We begin our course by examining ballads of supernatural incident by Burns and Coleridge, turning later to Mary Shelley's gothic novel *Frankenstein*; in counterpoint to these overtly supernatural tales, we read ballads and meditative poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge in which natural or commonplace events are scratched to reveal the marvelous or divine qualities that lie beneath their surface.

Next we address *childhood* as a key invention of the Romantic era. In an important sense, the Romantics invented childhood, or at least the notion of childhood as a magical as well as critical time of life. In the poetry of Wordsworth and Blake, childhood emerges as a distinct and crucial stage of life; in Wordsworth, it is sometimes imaged as the *best* period of one's life, a time of "visionary gleam."

Yet the Romantics celebrated not only innocence but also *energy*, particularly a rebellious or "Satanic" energy that challenged the political and social order of their day. They opposed tyranny and oppression in all its forms, governmental, ecclesiastical, and economic. As an unjust establishment had associated itself with divine authority, so they associated themselves with the devil's party. Thus Blake and Shelley express sympathy with the devil, and thus Byron became the most popular poet of his era by crafting a literary persona, the *Byronic hero*, modeled on Satan and on Cain, a hero or anti-hero alienated from society, remorse-torn but unrepentant.

But for all their high seriousness, the Romantics could also be wonderfully arch and satiric. Our course ends with John Keats, who wrote poems that ironically deflate gothic and romance conventions as well as odes that reflect more seriously on beauty and death, and finally with Byron, who deflates his own penchant for melodrama in his comic masterpiece "Don Juan."

Lecture 1: What Is Romanticism?

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Peter J. Manning and Susan J. Wolfson's "The Romantics and Their Contemporaries" in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2A, 3rd ed., pp. 3–29.



omantic poetry is, first and foremost, about how we see or perceive the world—about how imagination, intuition, and memory shape our perceptions. Romantic poetry thus offers the possibility of a *new world* in seeing the world anew, particularly the *natural* world. What the Romantic poets offer us are glimpses of a new and better world, one in which the things of nature take on a supernatural gleam, or, conversely, in which supernatural things, such as spirits and magical forces, seem a part of nature. This “natural supernaturalism,” as we may call it, is embodied in a work that is a cornerstone of the Romantic movement: the volume of poems titled *Lyrical Ballads*, jointly written by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Originally published in 1798, it was revised and expanded in 1800. Of this volume, Coleridge later wrote:

It was agreed [between myself and WW] that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least *romantic* [Coleridge uses the word “romantic” here in the sense of deriving from old chivalric or heroic romances—tales of heroes and knights and their often marvelous adventures]; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief . . . which constitutes poetic faith. Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.

In this course, we shall inquire into how well this description of giving things supernatural a natural interest, and giving the things of nature a supernatural interest, characterizes the poetry of the period as a whole.

What the Romantics also offer us is a heaven of *sound* in the richness and sonorousness of their poetry—arguably the richest poetry written in the history of English. Shakespeare is of course the greatest of English *dramatic* poets, but for nondramatic poetry—for lyrics, and odes, and descriptive and meditative verse—there is no finer place to turn than to the pages of the British Romantics.

Now we turn to the basic question: who *are* the Romantic poets—and why are they now called “Romantic”? I should begin by noting that in their own day, roughly the period from 1785 through 1835, they *weren’t* called “Romantics”; there was no recognized and delimited group of writers referred to as “the Romantics.” (It’s not as though we’re talking here about a group such as “The Beatles,” with its readily identifiable members: John, Paul,

George, and Ringo.) Indeed, as we've seen above in my quotation from Coleridge, the word "Romantic" referred, circa 1820, to something having the characteristics of the ancient or medieval romances: that is, tales of marvels and often of monsters, of heroes and knights and their quests, trials, and adventures. So how did the Romantic poets get to be called the Romantic poets? The answer is they were so called by later, Victorian-era writers; the label comes from the later nineteenth century. And it was applied because of the elements of medievalism, supernaturalism, and dark passion found in at least some of the works of most of the major Romantics, from Burns and Coleridge onwards.

Who *are* the Romantic poets? I personally am inclined to include Robert Burns among their number, and will be addressing Burns in lecture 2, but the number somewhat arbitrarily established by critical consensus in the early twentieth century was six, and these six are, in chronological order, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats. Blake, the eldest of these six, was born in 1757; Burns, who I consider a seventh Romantic poet, was born two years later, in 1759. Wordsworth and Coleridge are the next wave, born respectively in 1770 and 1772. And finally there's the so-called "second generation" of English Romantics, which includes Lord Byron, born in 1788; Percy Bysshe Shelley, born in 1792; and John Keats, born in 1795. By 1834, all seven of these men were dead except for Wordsworth, who lingered on for another sixteen years without writing much of note—thus scholars usually give some point in the 1830s as the end of the Romantic era—although, as we've seen, it was only writers of the 1830s and later who retrospectively constituted, and labeled, a Romantic literature in English.

What the Romantics and their immediate successors recognized as the primary motive of this new literary movement was political: namely, the hopes inspired by the French Revolution, which began with the fall of the Bastille in July 1789, and came to an end with the final fall of Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo in June 1815. In its early years, at least, the French Revolution held out an unprecedented promise to republican sympathizers throughout Europe; it was seen, by its French supporters and English and American sympathizers, as the possibility of totally restructuring society according to a rational and just scheme. However, I argue that the very habit of imagining a new and perfected world is itself deeply ingrained in Hebrew and Christian scriptures. And thus what the Romantics did, in their early enthusiasm for the French Revolution, was to transfer their own or their culture's supernatural expectations of a future paradise into more or less natural terms, with Europe transformed into a new Eden or "promised land."

Detail of *Scarborough Town and Castle*:
Morning: Boys Catching Crabs
 by Joseph M.W. Turner, ca. 1810



© Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is meant by “supernaturalism” in the context of Romantic poetry?
2. Who were the Romantic poets?

Suggested Reading

Manning, Peter J., and Susan J. Wolfson. “The Romantics and Their Contemporaries.” *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Abrams, M.H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 9th ed. Updated by Geoffrey Harpham. Boston: Wadsworth, 2008.

———. *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953.

———. *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. Part One: “This Is Our High Argument,” pp. 17–70. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971.

———, ed. *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1975.

Websites of Interest

Publisher Pearson/Longman provides a companion website for the *Longman Anthology of British Literature*. — www.ablongman.com/damroschbritlit3e

Poetry Read in Lecture One

William Blake: “Auguries of Innocence”; “Song of Liberty”

William Wordsworth: “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”; “The Solitary Reaper”; “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive”; and “Lo! From the innocuous flames, a lovely birth!” from *Descriptive Sketches* (1793), ll. 782 ff.

Robert Burns: final chorus of *The Jolly Beggars*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: “Rest awhile, / Children of Wretchedness!” from *Religious Musings*, ll. 300 ff.

William Hazlitt: “On the Living Poets”

Lecture 2: Folk Culture, the Ballad Tradition, and Robert Burns

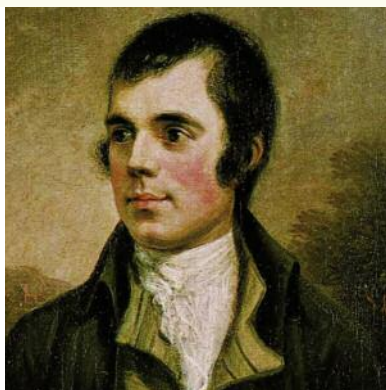
The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Matthew Gelbart's *The Invention of "Folk Music" and "Art Music": Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* and *Robert Burns: Selected Poems*, edited by Carol McGurk.



In this lecture, we look at three interconnected phenomena that helped to shape British Romanticism: the idea of *folk culture*; the ballad tradition in English; and Robert Burns's contribution to both of these, and thus his claim to being the first Romantic poet.

According to the theory of folk culture that originated in the eighteenth century, first in Scotland and later in Germany, folksongs are created by the people or peasant class, and re-created by every successive generation that performs and amends them. Over time these songs represent the native and characteristic genius of a people. Those who held to this model also tended to see popular or folk culture intimately connected to *national identity*, or to what being, say, Scottish or German *means*. Indeed, nationalism as we know it began in the Romantic era when Europe's educated elites essentially created distinctive national identities out of traditions associated with, and rightly or wrongly attributed to, their peasant classes.

As a farmer or peasant poet, Robert Burns became a lightning rod for all the age's ideas about native or untutored genius: he was called "the heaven-taught plowman," and was viewed as an example of what the British and particularly the Scottish soil could spontaneously produce, without the additives of a classical education or social etiquette. Burns was born January 25, 1759, the eldest son of a tenant farmer who lived in Ayrshire, in southwest Scotland. Burns himself worked as a small farmer and plowman from his boyhood until 1791, when he was thirty-two years old—in the meantime becoming a literary sensation with his first book of poems, titled *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786). After the success of this volume, Burns was asked to help collect old Scottish songs for a national collection, *The Scots Musical Museum*. Burns collected, amended, and wrote about two hundred songs, including several that remain popular ones, like *Auld Lang Syne* or "Long Ago Times," and "My Love is like a Red, Red Rose." These poems are in a technical sense *lyrics*: a *lyric* is a short, nonnarrative poem in which a single speaker expresses a state of mind, or process of thought or feeling.



Portrait of Robert Burns
by Alexander Nasmyth, 1787

A *ballad*, by contrast, is a narrative poem—a poem or song that tells a story. Many of the oldest ballads in English are written in the alternating 8/6 syllable lines that are because of this known as *ballad stanzas*. And many of these ancient ballads involve a dialogue between two speakers. Ballads are an important element of the English-language folk-song tradition that Burns inherited and re-created. Important events in the ballad revival include Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, 1765—a collection of ballads, songs, and verse romances that date from the medieval period to about 1700 (one of the most famous of the old ballads collected here is “Sir Patrick Spence”). After Percy's *Reliques*, the next major ballad collection is Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802–03), a collection of ballads derived from oral tradition, edited and revised by Scott. One of Scott's categories was “the *Romantic ballad*,” by which he meant ballads that dealt in strange, morbid, often supernatural topics—love was sometimes involved, too, but never happy love. For an example of a supernatural ballad of unhappy love, we turn to the ballad Scott titles “The Demon Lover,” though other ballad collections label it “James Harris” or “The House Carpenter.”

Robert Burns's own supernatural ballad, “Tam o Shanter,” is distinguished from its ancient forebears by being not in ballad stanza, but rather in *iambic tetrameter couplets*—that is, in rhyming lines of eight syllables each. Also unlike the ancient ballads, it is not in dialogue form, but rather told by a fallible narrator. Third and finally, although the supernatural elements of the poem are partly chilling, they are also partly humorous, and finally comic—the witches and warlocks who appear in the tale do not, in the end, catch the drunken protagonist Tam, but only catch his horse's tail.



The Harvest Waggon
by Thomas Gainsborough, 1767

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why was Robert Burns called the “heaven-taught plowman”?
2. What did Sir Walter Scott mean by the “Romantic ballad”?

Suggested Reading

Gelbart, Matthew. *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

McGuirk, Carol, ed. *Robert Burns: Selected Poems*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1993.

Other Books of Interest

Crawford, Robert. *The Bard: Robert Burns, a Biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Suggested Listening

Dylan, Bob. *The Bootleg Series*. New York: Columbia Records, 1991. 3 CDs.

Redpath, Jean. *The Songs of Robert Burns*. Burlington, MA: Rounder Records, 1996. 4 CDs.

Smith, Harry, ed. “The House Carpenter.” *Anthology of American Folk Music*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1997. 6 CDs.

Various Artists. *The Complete Songs of Robert Burns*. Glasgow, Scotland: Linn Records, 2007. 13 CDs.

Lecture 3: Wordsworth and Coleridge: Ballads of Nature and the Supernatural

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, edited by Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter.



We return in this lecture to the pivotal decade of the 1790s and its greatest literary achievement: the volume of poems coauthored by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, which appeared anonymously in 1798—*Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*. After reviewing Wordsworth and Coleridge's intertwined lives, we focus on two poems from *Lyrical Ballads*: Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Wordsworth's "We Are Seven."

What is a "lyrical ballad"? According to the definitions I gave of "lyric" and "ballad" in my last lecture, the phrase "lyrical ballad" is an oxymoron, as a lyric is a nonnarrative poem and a ballad is a narrative one.

Ballads tell stories, often through dialogue, while lyrics express a single speaker's process of thought or feeling, most often about love, as in Burns's "Red Red Rose." What then is a "lyrical ballad"? Wordsworth never answered this question, but he does give us a hint of what he had in mind in a sentence from the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that he added in 1800: he there writes that in "these poems . . . the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling." Wordsworth's formula suggests an important difference between his notion of a "lyrical ballad" and an ancient ballad such as "The Demon Lover," in which plot or action is central. In Wordsworth's conception of what the poems he and Coleridge wrote are doing, "the feeling" developed in a ballad is more important than the action or tale of the ballad.

Wordsworth's formula may help explain the mysterious, brilliant poem that opens the volume of *Lyrical Ballads* as it was



William Wordsworth
1770–1850
by Henry Eldridge, 1806



Samuel Taylor Coleridge
1772–1834
by George Dance, 1804

published in 1798: Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere*. The "action" of this ballad is marvelous or "romantic," but also curiously obscure—we're never sure *why* things happen in the poem, including the poem's central action: a mariner at sea kills an albatross with his crossbow. Why does he do this? We're never told in the poem. But many bad things happen after he kills the albatross, if not necessarily because he kills the albatross: his ship gets stranded in the windless heat of the tropical Pacific; all his ship-mates die; at the sight of glimmering water snakes his heart softens and he prays; winds arise and his ship is magically transported back to his country (which appears, as in most ancient ballads, to be Scotland); once back in Scotland he is obsessively compelled to tell his story over and over again. That's the gist of what happens in a six hundred fifty-eight-line poem; there's about as much narrated or implied action in the sixty lines of "The Demon Lover." But what Coleridge achieves with this poem is an overwhelming *feeling* of horror and terrified paralysis, as events unfold without any *clear* reason or justice—yet not without *some* sense of guilt and possible justice at work here. Killing an albatross seems not to have been a good idea, and may in general not be a good thing to do—but what happens to the Mariner and his crew seems entirely out of proportion to what the Mariner himself does.



The ancient Mariner inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen.

~Samuel Taylor Coleridge
The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere
 Part I

We turn next to a very different type of lyrical ballad: Wordsworth's poem "We Are Seven." While Coleridge in *Ancyent Marinere* makes the extraordinary believable—that is, he takes a wild tale and makes it psychologically compelling—Wordsworth takes seemingly ordinary incidents, such as a conversation between an adult and a child, and uses them to suggest extraordinary insights. He prods us to see the world as more strange and wonderful than it may seem to our jaded perceptions, and he does so in large part by implicitly questioning many of our commonplace assumptions. One such assumption, questioned in the course of "We Are Seven," is this: the dead are dead and buried. While the statement "the dead are dead" is perfectly logical, it's also somehow not fully in accord with how the dead inhabit the psychology of the living. And it's this lesson that Wordsworth wanted his ideal readers to garner from this lyrical ballad, even though the poem's speaker remains oddly obtuse. Wordsworth suggests through this dialogue between number-crunching speaker and pious cottage girl that matters of fact and computation do not tell the whole truth about the world. The dead are still in one sense or another with us, and the world is a stranger and perhaps more magical place than it may appear to eyes calloused by age and custom.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is a “lyrical ballad”?
2. How are *The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere* and “We Are Seven” different?

Suggested Reading

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, and William Wordsworth. *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*. Eds. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009.

Other Books of Interest

Holmes, Richard. *Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772–1804*. New York: Pantheon, 1989.

Wordsworth, Jonathan, Michael C. Jaye, and Robert Woof. *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*. Eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979.

Lecture 4:
Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*:
Rustic Life and the Questionable Pleasures of Nature

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, edited by Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter.



he amazing thing about Wordsworth's lyrical ballads is how such seemingly simple poems can finally prove so meaty: in "We are Seven," "Anecdote for Fathers," and "Simon Lee" we encounter fundamental questions about life and death, human psychology, ethics, and politics. Another cluster of lyrical ballads—"Expostulation and Reply," "The Tables Turned," and "Lines Written in Early Spring"—introduces what is perhaps Wordsworth's central question: how is humanity related to the natural world—to birds and bees, grasses and trees, sky and stones? How are we related to non-man-made environments—and, moreover, how *ought we* to be related? In the companion poems "Expostulation and Reply" and "The Tables Turned," Wordsworth makes a simple but powerful point: we think too much about doing things, about activity and intellection; it's important as well for the imaginative life, and for the human life, to be passive and receptive in environments that may have something to teach us about what it means *to be*. Wordsworth here imagines simple, animal being—and he imagines that it is joy.

*Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! on my life,
There's more of wisdom in it.*

-William Wordsworth
The Tables Turned
3rd stanza

But Wordsworth's poetry is characterized not so much by claims and assertions as by impressions, surmises, questionings and self-questionings. And thus his confidence in "The Tables Turned" is offset by the doubts expressed in a far greater poem, "Lines Written in Early Spring." Here Wordsworth's speaker expresses a *belief* that all of nature experiences joy in being—but admits that his belief isn't verifiable; he could be wrong. And in any event, he can't know. But it's finally the compulsion to *think* about such things that separates the speaker from the impulsive pleasure he either detects in, or projects onto, his environment.

At the end of 1799, Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy moved back to their birthplace, the mountainous Lake District of northeastern England. And Wordsworth, in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, sounds like a man who's come back home, and isn't afraid to celebrate it. So while Wordsworth's 1798 Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* spoke of poetically employing the language of the lower and middle classes, the 1800 preface famously praises "the real language of men," and doesn't hesitate to add that real men live in the

mountains. Wordsworth's praise of "low and rustic" life finds its perfect flowering in the quietly tragic poem that ends the expanded 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads: Michael, a Pastoral Poem*. In literary history before Wordsworth, the term *pastoral* designates a kind of poetry involving the highly *idealized* life of shepherds: in this literary genre, shepherds have little to do with their days but sing love songs, have song competitions, and occasionally mourn the deaths of other shepherds. It is, evidently, an urban fantasy of what rural life is like, one that goes back to Greek and Latin models, and that flourishes in early modern English works such as Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calendar* (1579) and Alexander Pope's *Pastorals* (1709). But Wordsworth gives us for the first time in history a realistic tale of a hard-working, dignified shepherd. Moreover, he gives us a *tragic* tale of a low and rustic life—thus flouting the theory of literary *decorum* which held that only socially exalted characters (kings, aristocrats, leaders) are suited to the exalted genres of tragedy and epic. Michael isn't a king, or a prince—but Wordsworth nonetheless might have titled his poem, "The Tragedy of Michael, Lake District Shepherd." And like Shakespearean tragedy, it's written in what was considered the noblest of English poetic forms, *blank verse* or unrhymed iambic pentameter (ten syllables per line).



A contemporary view of Yewbarrow reflected in the calm of Wastwater at dawn, Lake District, Cumbria, England.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What characterizes Wordsworth's poetry?
2. What was notable about the subject of "Michael, a Pastoral Poem"?

Suggested Reading

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, and William Wordsworth. *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*. Eds. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009.

Other Books of Interest

Wordsworth, Jonathan, Michael C. Jaye, and Robert Woof. *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*. Eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979.

Lecture 5: The Descriptive-Meditative Poem and the Divine in Nature

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*, edited by Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter.



We now examine a particular kind of poem written by Coleridge and Wordsworth—the *descriptive-meditative poem*. We'll be looking closely at three instances of the genre, two by Coleridge—"The Eolian Harp" and "Frost at Midnight"—and one by Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey," the great poem that concludes the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*.

Why are these poems often called "descriptive-meditative"? The answer is fairly simple: they involve a speaker who, situated at a particular place, describes the sights and sounds of that place—and then his description of place gradually morphs into a meditation on things *unseen*. These unseen things include personal *memories* associated with the place or with details of the place (for instance, in "Frost at Midnight" Coleridge, sitting in his cottage in Nether Stowey, sees a film on his fireplace grate, and this film takes him back to his boyhood, when he entertained superstitious beliefs about such films—when he believed that seeing one foretold "the arrival of some absent friend"). But the unseen things of Coleridge's descriptive-meditative poems include as well a sense of the divine *spirit* that rolls through and animates all things. Nature is infused with the divine for Coleridge—as it will be, through Coleridge's influence, for Wordsworth.

This sense of nature as animated by a living God or World-Spirit is a signal contribution of Romantic poetry. It is, in effect, another aspect of *natural supernaturalism*—that distinctively Romantic tendency to see the things of nature as imbued with supernatural significance, and to see the supernatural as a natural occurrence.

Coleridge's poems "The Eolian Harp" and "Frost at Midnight" are also known as *conversation poems*. That is, their speakers are not just describing the sights and sounds in and around their cottages in Clevedon ("Eolian Harp")



© John Logie Baird

An æolian harp dating from the 1830s was restrung by its owner after adding a spring loaded copper support to prevent the porpoise-styled string posts from breaking. The instrument was placed in an open window where a breeze blowing through the strings would cause it to "play."

and Nether Stowey (“Frost at Midnight”), but doing so as though speaking to cottage companions—in the one poem, Coleridge addresses his fiancée, soon to be his wife, Sara Fricker; in the other, later poem, their infant son Hartley. This conversational technique affords Coleridge a considerable amount of latitude for *spontaneity*, or at least the sound of spontaneity—he’s a person speaking, thinking aloud about things, even rethinking them. The verse form he uses is *blank verse* or unrhymed iambic pentameter, and he uses it so supplely that at times it’s hard to hear it as verse at all: the form gives his thought shape, but it’s not at all intrusive.

Wordsworth learned a lot from Coleridge’s descriptive-meditative method, and upon it built one of his masterpieces, “Tintern Abbey”—or, to give the poem its full title, “Lines, written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798.” This full title specifies the place Wordsworth describes—the Wye River Valley, upstream of the picturesque ruins of Tintern Abbey. As the poem unfolds, the reader is surprised to find, by line 122, that Wordsworth’s sister Dorothy is there with him, the silent auditor of his musings. Dorothy is here to William as Sara and Hartley were to Coleridge in his conversation poems. Wordsworth’s *tone*, however, is less conversational than Coleridge’s had been; Wordsworth speaks here with greater elevation and formality than Coleridge did. Wordsworth also writes in certain passages here with a sublime *vagueness*—especially when speaking of his spiritual insights, he writes with an obscurity appropriate to intuitions that can’t be fully apprehended or expressed.

It’s important to note in all this that “Tintern Abbey” is *not* a “lyrical ballad”—it bears no resemblance to “We Are Seven” or “Simon Lee,” but is rather one of the “other poems” referred to in that volume’s full title—*Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*. “Tintern Abbey” is a descriptive-meditative poem, but in its intermittent obscurity and its “impassioned music” it might also be called an *ode*: a term that refers to a certain kind of stylistically elevated poem of address that originates with the ancient Greek poet Pindar. Wordsworth himself wrote in a note he added to the poem in 1800: “I have not ventured to call this Poem an Ode; but it was written with a hope that in the transitions, and the impassioned music of the versification, would be found the principal requisites of that species of composition.”

Tintern Abbey
by J.M.W. Turner, 1793



FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What is a “descriptive-meditative” poem?
2. Who is the speaker addressing in “Frost at Midnight”?

Suggested Reading

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, and William Wordsworth. *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800*. Eds. Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009.

Other Books of Interest

Abrams, M.H. “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric.” *From Sensibility to Romanticism*. Eds. F.W. Hilles and Harold Bloom. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 527–60.

Articles of Interest

Potkay, Adam. “Wordsworth and the Ethics of Things.” *PMLA* (Publications of the Modern Language Association of America). Vol. 123. No. 2. March 2008, pp. 390–404.

Lecture 6: Wordsworth and the Invention of Childhood

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and "The Immortality Ode" in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2A, 3rd ed.



ere we address a key invention of the Romantic era: *childhood*. In an important sense, the Romantics invented childhood—or at least the notion of childhood as a magical as well as critical time of life. They of course couldn't invent childhood itself: in a biological sense there have been children as long as there have been adults, as long as there have been humans. But what authors of the Romantic era did was to explore childhood as a distinct and crucial stage of life—as the defining phase in the psychological development of the individual—and, at the extreme, as the *best* period of one's life.

Wordsworth was interested, from the time of the ballads "We Are Seven" and "Anecdote for Fathers," in what *children had to teach us*. And as a corollary of that idea, he was interested in the ways in which natural environments taught children; he was interested, in other words, in the sort of education children received apart from their elders. We saw this idea in our last lecture, in reading Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," in which Coleridge meditated on the benign influence that growing up amid natural beauty should have upon his son Hartley. But Wordsworth fleshes this story out by examining in detail his own childhood experiences as positive *formative events* in his life—as things that made him what he is, a Poet, and that led him to believe in the "spirit that rolls through all things," the "motion and spirit" that he addressed in "Tintern Abbey." As Wordsworth comes to realize, his childhood in nature in large part shaped his identity and beliefs—for his own good. He used his childhood memories as the basis for writing a long, thirteen-book autobiographical epic called *The Prelude* (1805)—a poem about the development of his own mind, and of the creative powers that would enable him, he hoped, to write the sort of long philosophical poem on man and nature that Coleridge wanted him to write. As it turned out, Wordsworth never wrote that long philosophical poem—but what he did write was his masterpiece as a "prelude" to it.

In the ode Wordsworth published in his 1807 volume of *Poems*—and that he originally titled, quite simply, *Ode*—Wordsworth generalizes not to consider his own particular childhood, but childhood in general: and he came to make some grand, perhaps mythic, claims about it. Here we find "the Romantic child" in full bloom—the child as an ideal, as a being metaphysically superior to the adult.



The Marsham Children
by Thomas Gainsborough, 1787

In 1798, Wordsworth might have hesitated from calling “Tintern Abbey” an ode, but this time he unabashedly claims the prestige of this high literary genre. He does so, in part, because this poem is *structured* more in the mode of what a reader of his day expected a Pindaric ode to look like: that is, rather than being written in blank verse, as “Tintern Abbey” is, it is in *irregular stanzas*—stanzas of varying line lengths and rhyme schemes. As a title, however, *Ode* is rather stark and uninformative. Wordsworth thus provided a subtitle when he revised the poem in 1815: *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*. Readers typically now refer to the poem as either “the Immortality Ode” or “the Intimations Ode.”

But keep in mind that it’s not altogether clear that the poem is *about* immortality. What it’s most clearly about is not posthumous immortality, or the notion that we will in some form continue on after death, but rather *prenatal existence*—the notion that the child’s spirit or intellect has come from some divine or heavenly source. Wordsworth’s intuition is that the light of this prenatal home that colors the way that the child sees the world—all is bright, radiant, and indeed supernatural, because the child still sees through a heavenly lens. The child can see, to borrow a phrase from Blake, “heaven in a wild flower.” The child sees not with the empirical eye, but through it. He or she is not locked into the material world that cages the rest of us.

The first two-thirds of Wordsworth’s poem is a lament for the loss of childhood vision; but in the final third, Wordsworth finds some recompense for that loss. Wordsworth finds that the grownup can have the best of both worlds: he can still reexperience through memory the brilliant light of childhood, but also feel, as the child cannot yet feel, the bonds of sympathy and compassion that bind together beings who know that death is our common end. Wordsworth sounds tentatively hopeful here that *something* may lie beyond death—he speaks at the end of “the faith that looks through death”—but immortality remains a hope; the only certainty the grownup has is that we will each of us die.



FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How did the Romantics “invent” childhood?
2. In Wordsworth’s *Ode*, what is the only certainty?

Suggested Reading

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude* and “Immortality Ode.” *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2A. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Gill, Stephen. *William Wordsworth: A Life*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1990.

Wordsworth, Jonathan, Michael C. Jaye, and Robert Woof. *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*. Eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979.

Lecture 7: Blake and Infantine Innocence

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are William Blake's "Songs of Innocence" and "Visions of the Daughters of Albion" in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2A, 3rd ed.



his lecture introduces William Blake and examines his take on the Romantic child. Blake's emphasis is on the *innocence* of infancy and childhood.

Blake was an artist as well as a poet, and most of his poems appear in what are called "illuminated books"—that is, elaborately illustrated, etched, and hand-colored books that he himself produced. Keep in mind, then, that when I read from Blake's poetry I'm necessarily divorcing his words from the illustrated books of which they're a part. Fortunately, you *can* see Blake's poems in their proper context of illustration and design if you log on to the Blake Archive, a free scholarly online resource for Blake's illuminated books (see suggested readings for Web address).

In his illustrated volume of poems *Songs of Innocence* (1789), Blake's children, trusting in either elders or a father God, remain imaginatively unstained by the ugly aspects of reality, and particularly the urban reality of the rough and tumble late eighteenth-century London in which Blake lived and worked. This notion of childhood innocence may sound fairly commonplace now, but if it is, it is largely as a Romantic inheritance. In Blake's own day, one still heard a lot in church about "infant depravity." The Ninth of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England concerns "original or birth-sin," the sin we're all born with as sons and daughters of the fallen Adam, and that makes us naturally inclined to evil. Infant depravity ultimately goes back to the Church Father St. Augustine, who depicted the baby as a depraved tyrant, the embodiment of humanity's endless and endlessly misdirected desire, impressed with original sin and sorely in need of discipline and Christian regeneration. "If babies are innocent," Augustine declared, "it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength" (*Confessions* Book 1, section 7). Blake gives us, by contrast, the innocent baby and child. In his *Songs of Innocence*,



Page with illustration by Blake for the poem "Infant Joy" appearing in *Songs of Innocence*.

© Library of Congress

the innocent child is protected from a sordid adult world by his ability to see angels and God, and his inability to perceive the cruelty and exploitation of life in the unregulated London of his day. Yet the child's hopes are such that the adult reader cannot share them in any simple way, being invited rather to see that otherworldly joy is fed to the weak and poor to anaesthetize them to their earthly sufferings. These are songs, Blake tells us in his "Introduction," that "every child may joy to hear"—which children may even "weep with joy" to hear, recognizing but transcending the pain they contain—but that adults must hear, as they must assess conventional Christianity, more critically.

In another of Blake's poems, the narrative and dramatic *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), Blake counters another Augustinian and Anglican church doctrine: he agrees that infants know (to use the church term) "the lust of the flesh," but he affirms this as a good thing. For Blake, infants and small children naturally seek sensual pleasure, and thus sensual pleasure is a good. Blake held, moreover, that children know and in their innocence validate *sexual* pleasure. In this notion of infantile and childhood sexuality Blake anticipates Freud, though Blake is much more positive about sex than the founder of psychoanalysis will be. Blake is the only one of the English Romantics to be quite so frank about sexuality—in this regard, his Romantic child is a far cry from Wordsworth's.

In the mythic narrative of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake creates a central female protagonist, Oothoon, who proclaims at the end of her tale that she has regained the innocence of infancy. Just as bad things happen to the chimney sweeps and enslaved African boys of *Songs of Innocence*, so bad things have happened to Oothoon: she has been raped and impregnated by a roaring slave-master named "Bromion," and subsequently has been rejected by the man she loves, a withdrawn and self-tormented character called "Theotormon." Yet Oothoon celebrates her imaginative freedom from insults offered to her body, declaring herself a virgin even after her rape by Bromion, and eager for erotic bliss with her beloved Theotormon.



Frontispiece to William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What was “infant depravity”?
2. In what way did Blake anticipate Freud?

Suggested Reading

Blake, William. “Songs of Innocence” and “Visions of the Daughters of Albion.” *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2A. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Blake, William. *Blake’s Poetry and Designs*. Eds. John E. Grant and Mary Lynn Johnson. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007.

Potkay, Adam. *The Story of Joy from the Bible to Late Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 171–79.

Websites of Interest

A joint project of several universities and organizations, *The William Blake Archive* provides reproductions of Blake’s illuminated plates and other information. — <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake>

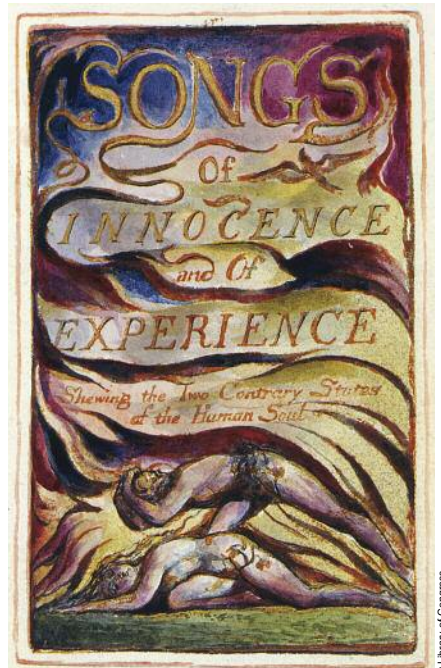
Lecture 8: Blake and Satanic Energy

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are William Blake's "Songs of Experience" and "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2A, 3rd ed.



As we observed in the last lecture, imaginative vision and moral innocence might make the world tolerable, but it is still, morally speaking, an intolerable world that Blake depicts: a world of racial slavery, child-slavery, the oppression of women, and the repression of sexuality. To frankly recognize this world as a malign one is to pass from Blake's "Songs of Innocence" to its counterpart, the "Songs of Experience" of 1794. Here "God & Priest & King" become explicit villains, an unholy trinity opposed by the clear-eyed defiance of poor children who are enslaved, overworked, and repressed. Rather than conversing with angels, the children of "Songs of Experience" possess, to use a Blakean phrase, Satanic "energy." Now Satan isn't, in orthodox Christianity, a hero—he is, rather, the first to turn inward and away from God, the lover of sin and father of Death. But Blake opposed orthodox Christianity, especially as it had, in England, allied itself with the political state; to fight state power, one had to fight its God as well. Thus Blake expresses sympathy for the devil, the original adversary of God—or at least of how God has been imagined by orthodox Christianity.

In conjunction with "Songs of Experience," Blake wrote another work in praise of Satanic energy, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" (1790–93). It's a strange and complex work: part prose and part poetry; part satire—of popular notions about heaven and hell—and part prophesy, with Blake aligning himself with Isaiah and Ezekiel, the Hebrew prophets, as fellow visionaries and social critics who spoke truth to power. Though the work is called a "marriage," and though its cover page depicts an embrace, all the disputations in the work area are won by the devil's party. Hell occupies central stage in the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" because after eighteen centuries during which Christianity had come to identify itself with a ruling

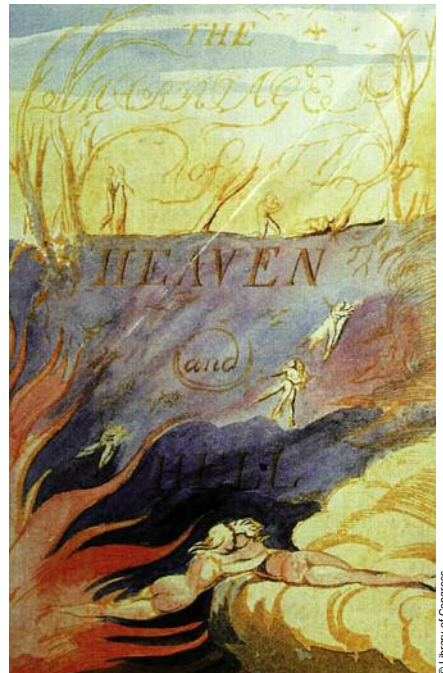


Frontispiece to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 1794.

elite, the claims of disruptive energy needed to be aired. In a section of Blake's work called "Proverbs of Hell," we find the contraries of the biblical Book of Proverbs—whereas the biblical Proverbs teach prudential wisdom, Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" celebrate energy, action, exuberance, and excess.

Blake's two heroes of disruptive energy in the face of institutional Christianity are Satan, naturally enough, but more strikingly—because less obviously—Jesus Christ himself. Jesus, Blake argues, was himself a rule-breaker who defied the religion of his birth: plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath rather than resting; drinking wine with women and tax collectors; turning away the law from the woman taken in adultery. Blake held, moreover, that the great poet was himself the ultimate rule-breaker, or the true Satanic hero. Of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a retelling of the fall from Eden story in which Satan is clearly not the intended hero, Blake wryly observed that its best poetry nonetheless revolves around Satan: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it." And elsewhere Blake wrote, using the terms of morality in an ironic or inverted sense: "The grandest Poetry is Immoral, the Grandest Characters Wicked, Very Satan: Othello a murderer, Prometheus, Jehovah, Jesus a wine bibber."

Although we have no evidence that any of the other Romantic poets knew of Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" or even his "Songs of Experience," Blake's sympathy for the devil nonetheless laid out what would become a common Romantic theme: for example, Burns wrote in a letter of 1787, "I set as little by kings, lords, clergy, critics, etc., as all these respectable Gentry do by my Bardship . . . I am resolved to study the sentiments of a very respectable Personage, Milton's Satan—'Hail horrors! Hail, infernal world!'" And a quarter of a century after "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," Percy Shelley wrote in his *Defence of Poetry*: "Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy . . . with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments."



Frontispiece to William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790–93.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Who did Blake align himself with in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”?
2. How did Blake think of Jesus as a disruptive hero?

Suggested Reading

Blake, William. “Songs of Experience” and “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.” *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2A. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Bentley, G.E., Jr. *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

Potkay, Adam. *The Story of Joy from the Bible to Late Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Websites of Interest

A joint project of several universities and organizations, *The William Blake Archive* provides reproductions of Blake’s illuminated plates and other information. — <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake>

Lecture 9: The Byronic Hero

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Lord Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto I," in *Byron's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Alice Levine.



he Byronic hero—a popular literary creation of Lord Byron—was the first alienated hero, the man who stands outside society, who belongs to no particular nation and abides by no sanctioned creed; possessing a type of “Satanic” energy, he lives according to his own will, and his own sense of honor or chivalry.

With the second generation of English Romantics such as Byron, Percy Shelley, Mary Shelley, and Keats, we come to the *children of the Revolution*: those who came of age in the *Napoleonic* era of European warfare, and also under the poetic spell of their innovative British elders, Burns, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. Lord Byron, the eldest of this next wave of Romantics, was born in 1788, and was thus just short of one-and-a-half years old when the Bastille fell. Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in August 1792, the month in which a Parisian mob killed the Swiss Guards who had protected the royal Tuileries palace. The poet John Keats, whom Percy Shelley admired, was born in October 1795, the last month of the “National Convention,” the most radical of the Revolutionary assemblies. Percy Shelley’s second wife, the novelist Mary Shelley, was born in August 1797, toward the end of a summer in which Revolutionary troops had occupied the ancient republic of Venice and the Ionian islands of Greece. In 1799, Napoleon Bonaparte, who had made his name with French military campaigns in Italy and Egypt, was named “first consul” of France—he in effect became a military dictator; in 1804, Napoleon was declared *emperor* of France, ceremonially placing a crown on his own head. His empire would last just under eleven years, until 1815, when at the famous Battle of Waterloo he was defeated by the combined forces of Britain,



Byron in Albanian Dress
by Thomas Phillips, ca. 1835
George Gordon, 6th Lord Byron
(1788–1824)

Austria, and Prussia. He would die in exile, on the remote prison-island of St. Helena, in 1821.

And, dying in 1821, he was not outlived or long outlived by the second-generation Romantic poets. This is the generation that died young and tragically, and made doing so seem *romantic*. When Keats died of tuberculosis in 1821, a few months before Napoleon's death, he was only twenty-five years old; Shelley died by drowning in 1822, just short of his thirtieth birthday. Byron attained what seems by comparison the ripe old age of thirty-six when he died in 1824. What he died of remains somewhat murky: his contemporaries called it "a chill" or "swamp fever," but modern medical speculation has offered as an immediate cause of death "uremic poisoning," a failure of the kidneys to secrete urine.

Compared to the first-generation Romantics, Byron and the Shelleys and Keats were more cosmopolitan in outlook: citizens of the world, they particularly admired the art, mythology, and antiquities of Italy and Greece, and in Byron and Shelley's case, the democratic and republican *politics* of ancient Athens and Rome.

Lord Byron became the most famous of the British Romantics—famous throughout Europe and the Americas—by doing three things, and doing them well: first, he gave his audiences verse tales and descriptions of an exotic and seemingly timeless Mediterranean world, a world of Turkish pashas and Greek pirates, Circassian slave-girls and Albanian infidels, plotting Venetian aristocrats and smoldering Spanish beauties. Secondly, Byron himself, in a highly publicized way, visited the far-flung locations he wrote about—and so the various "heroes" of his tales all became associated, in the public imagination, with Byron himself. Third and finally, Byron gave this so-called "Byronic hero" a distinct and compelling personality: he was the first alienated hero. Yet although independent from conventional manner and morals, the Byronic hero is nonetheless haunted by terrible crimes or sins of his past—sins that are usually, for dramatic effect, left unspecified or imperfectly specified. In some of Byron's narratives, the crime of *incest* is often hinted at—and a hint was all that was needed once Byron's own real-life affair with his half-sister became a topic of public gossip. For such sins the Byronic hero is remorse-torn but unrepentant: he remains a moody, alienated wanderer over the face of the earth. He has something of the Satanic energy earlier praised by Blake, and Byron's early reviewers noted the Satanic overtones in Byron's verse narratives: one contemporary reviewer wrote that they possess "a sort of demoniacal sublimity, not without some traits of the ruined Archangel." But while his Satanic majesty may color the willful, energetic Byronic hero, that hero is based still more closely on another biblical archetype: the Cain of the Cain and Abel story in Genesis.

Lord Byron offered a glamorized account of his own dramatic young life and travels in his first celebrated poem, "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" (Cantos 1 and 2), completed when Byron was twenty-three, and published in 1812. "*Childe*" is here a medieval term for "a squire on the point of taking his vows of knighthood." Byron's working title for the poem had been "Childe Burun," "Burun" being an archaic form of "Byron"—but as he moved toward publication, this direct self-identification with the protagonist of his poem seemed a

bit too indiscreet or shocking, so he substituted the more neutral name “Harold.” But he kept the archaic “Childe”—and the language Byron uses in these first two cantos of the poem is also archaic—as is the literary form he writes it in, the *Spenserian stanza*—the verse form of Edmund Spenser’s Elizabethan epic-romance, *The Faerie Queene*. By writing in an archaic poetic language and poetic form, he distances himself from his “native land” (stanza 4)—“then loathed he in his native land to dwell”; or, at least, he loathed to live in his native land in the early nineteenth century. He thus projects himself, poetically, into a more “romantic” past—indeed, into the past of epic, chivalric romances, such as Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Byron, in his very poetic style, figuratively “leaves home,” turns away from early nineteenth-century England, in a poem that’s literally *about* leaving home, and sailing south, “beyond the sea.” “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” is about crossings of boundaries, transgression, and exoticism—and also about the sea itself, as a sublime space that the Romantics and Byron in particular did much to glamorize.

*Lo! where the Giant on the
mountain stands,
His blood-red tresses deep’ning
in the sun,
With death-shot glowing in his
fiery hands,
And eye that scorcheth all it
glares upon;
Restless it rolls, now fixed, and
now anon
Flashing a far,—and at his iron feet
Destruction cowers to mark what deeds
are done.
For on this morn three potent nations
meet,
To shed before his shrine the blood he
deems most sweet.*

—Lord Byron
Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage
Canto I, stanza 39

Frontispiece to a ca. 1825 edition of *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* by Lord Byron.



FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are the characteristics of the Byronic hero?
2. Why did Byron change the name of his poem to “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage”?

Suggested Reading

Byron, Lord. “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, Canto I.” *Byron’s Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Alice Levine. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010.

Other Books of Interest

Marchand, Leslie A. *Byron: A Portrait*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Lecture 10: Byron and Shelley: Darkness and Light

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Lord Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto IV" in *Byron's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Alice Levine, and Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Julian and Maddalo, a Conversation," "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude," and "Ode to the West Wind" in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, edited by Neil Fraistat and Donald H. Reiman.



Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley were friends from the summer of 1816 through to Shelley's death six years later, inspiring though occasionally exasperating one another. To a large degree they attracted one another as opposites attract. This opposition may be represented in broad strokes: Byron the pessimist versus

Shelley the idealist. Byron the prince of darkness versus Shelley the angel of light. Byron the gloomy Calvinist versus Shelley the militant atheist. The reprobate Byron versus the utopian Shelley. Of course these oppositions are too schematic—I offer them only in a preliminary way. As we look more closely at these poets, their differences soften: thus, for example, Byron, the alleged pessimist, also has a certain political hopefulness and republican ardor—in the end, he laid down his life for the independence of Greece. As for Shelley—although an idealist, his political idealism is often mixed with a good dose of skepticism and sometimes even despair about the human condition; Shelley was, all in all, only *tentatively* utopian. This broad opposition between Byron and Shelley was first sketched by Shelley himself, in a poem based on his conversations with Byron—a poem titled "Julian and Maddalo, a Conversation" (1819), in which Byron appears as Maddalo, and Shelley as Julian. Having set up this counterpoint between Shelley and Byron, in the second part of my lecture I backtrack and fill in the outlines of Shelley's biography.

We turn next to examine Shelley's narrative poem "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude" (published in February 1816), written soon before Shelley's acquaintance with Byron in the summer of 1816. Mary Shelley said of "Alastor": "none of Shelley's poems is more characteristic than this." What makes it characteristic, I would argue, is both its intense idealism and its corresponding *critique* of idealism. The poem concerns a young man who is a visionary, a dreamer, and who comes to a bad end chasing his unattainable dream—but it opens and closes in the voice of another man, a poet steeped in the poetry of Wordsworth, who is critical as well as sympathetic toward the young dreamer. This



Percy Bysshe Shelley
(1792–1822)
by Alfred Clint after a portrait by
Amelia Curran, 1819

is how Evan K. Gibson (1947) summarizes “Alastor”: “[it is] the story of a youth who, after living a life of solitude, falls in love with a vision of his ‘soul mate,’ a creation of his own mind, and perishes of disappointment, apart from any other influence either human or divine. The title of the poem [‘Alastor’] was selected after the poem was completed. It contains a reference to a supernatural being. But Alastor is not one of the characters of the poem. He is [rather] a personification of the *theme* of the poem, as the subtitle indicates [*the spirit of solitude*]. A spirit of solitude, the ruling temper of the poet’s life, causes his destruction.” Although Shelley never abandons his idealism, “he was not at all sure that man’s ideals had any returnable value beyond the very important ones of love and sympathy in the present life.” Thus the poet figure in “Alastor” is faulted, if sympathized with, for turning his back on actual love in the real world—the Arab maiden who loves him—and vainly seeking the girl of his own erotic dreaming, his own fantasy. Surely there is an autobiographical element to this poem, written by a twenty-three-year-old who had already pursued his ideal through two young women, leaving his first wife Harriet’s love for Mary’s—and now seeing the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual in Mary herself.

Shelley, who died just short of thirty years old, spent most of his last six years itinerant through Europe: he spent time in both France and Switzerland—it was in Switzerland, on Lake Geneva, that the Shelleys befriended Byron; but more and more both the Shelleys and Byron resided in various parts of Italy, a country they came to love. As a poet, Shelley acquired a particularly fine eye for Italian skies and water, land and weather: for the “Italian Heaven” that in “Julian and Maddalo” he saw reflected in little Allegra Byron’s eyes. Shelley writes elsewhere in that poem of a sunset in Venice: “Oh, / How beautiful is sunset, when the glow / Of Heaven descends upon a land like thee, / Thou paradise of exiles, Italy!” (ll. 54–7). Shelley would die in Italy, in a boating accident on the bay of Spezia; his boat was named *Don Juan*, after Byron’s last work, an ongoing comic epic. When Shelley’s body washed up ashore, a copy of John Keats’s poems was found in his jacket pocket.

This lecture concludes by recommending one of Shelley’s finest Italian odes, “Ode to the West Wind” (1819)—a poem full of cautious political optimism.

For Byron the only redemption is to be found in nature, and, more importantly, in *art*: the Venice Byron describes had lost its political autonomy, first to Napoleon and next to Austria, and Byron doesn’t see that independence coming back, much less hope, like Shelley, for the political and moral renovation of humanity in general. What he does see as enduring, immortally, is the fame of the *literary characters* associated with Venice, including Shakespeare’s Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*, and Othello from the tragedy named after him. What Byron hopes, then, is that his own literary alter ego, Harold, might enjoy some of the same posthumous, redemptive fame as Shakespeare’s characters.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How can Shelley and Byron be cast as opposites?
2. Where did Byron find redemption?

Suggested Reading

Byron, Lord. "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto IV" and "Ode to the West Wind." *Byron's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Alice Levine. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Julian and Maddalo, a Conversation," "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude," and "Ode to the West Wind." *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Neil Fraistat and Donald H. Reiman. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Holmes, Richard. *Shelley: The Pursuit*. New York: Quartet Books, 1974.

Marchand, Leslie A. *Byron: A Portrait*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

Lecture 11:
Gothic Horrors: Coleridge's "Christabel" and
Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Christabel" in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2A, 3rd ed., and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, edited by Susan Wolfson.



Coleridge comes back into our story as a bard of enchantment, of verse tales of the supernatural, that were much admired by Byron and the Shelleys—indeed, two of what are now Coleridge's best-known poems, "Christabel" and "Kubla Khan," though written in the 1790s, were only brought into print with

Byron's assistance, in 1816, roughly eighteen years after their composition. I focus first on "Christabel," as a verse tale that involves not only the supernatural, but more specifically the *gothic*; I proceed from Coleridge's gothic poem of vampirism and serpent-women to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a semi-Gothic work about a solitary scientist who gives life to a creature composed from parts of corpses.

The word "Gothic" originally referred to the Goths, a German tribe—then came to signify "germanic"—then came to signify "medieval." "Gothic architecture" has since the eighteenth century denoted the medieval type of architecture, characterized by the use of the pointed arch and vault, which spread through western Europe between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries. In England, we find many examples of Gothic architecture in church, cathedral, and chapel designs, as well as in the buildings of the two ancient universities, Cambridge and Oxford. But in the seventeenth century, such architecture fell out of favor. By the earlier eighteenth century, gothic architecture was routinely deprecated, while neo-classical revival was all the rage; and the term "gothic" had itself become a pejorative, used to mean "stupid, barbaric, uncivilized."

But in the second half of the eighteenth century, Gothic architecture slowly came back into favor—and the *ruins* of certain Gothic edifices, especially the monasteries or abbeys that had fallen into decay since Henry VIII abolished monastic orders in



Illustration from "Christabel" by H.J. Ford and Lancelot Speed in *The Blue Fairy Book*, edited by Andrew Lang (1891).

England. Hand in hand with this revival of Gothic taste came the rise of the Gothic novel, or Gothic romance—so called after the subtitle of the first such novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto; A Gothic Story* (1764). Walpole set the terms for a new mode of fiction that flourished through the early nineteenth century, one that, first of all, had a medieval setting, as in *Otranto*, typically involving medieval castles or abbeys, preferably ones with dungeons and hidden passageways. Beyond the setting of a remote castle or monastery, there are persistent *character types* introduced by Walpole: the tyrannical or persecuting father, and the persecuted son or daughter. Villainous monks will also turn out to be major players in later Gothic fiction, especially ones who are also Faustian overreachers, men who sell their souls for power or glory or other earthly lust. Finally, there are a host of *plot devices* introduced by Walpole, and rendered conventional by later Gothic authors: these devices include symbolic dreams; mysterious portents; animated statues and portraits; magic mirrors; and, of course, ghosts and other supernatural beings.

Coleridge's "Christabel" is set in and around a gothic castle, during the Middle Ages. The action of the poem is this: the daughter of the castle-owner, the lovely lady Christabel, goes out into the woods at midnight to pray for her fiancé, her "betrothed knight"—and while in the woods she comes across a beautiful and allegedly persecuted princess, the lady Geraldine. Geraldine tells how she's been abducted by ruffians, and Christabel invites her into her castle, offering her the protection of her father, the baron Sir Leoline. But inviting Geraldine into the castle—into her own bed chamber—is Christabel's fatal mistake: as Geraldine is not a beautiful and persecuted heroine, but in reality a vampire and *lamia*, or "serpent woman."

"Christabel" lacks an ending, or plot resolution, in a conventional sense. It is what is often called a Romantic "fragment poem," a poem that seems part of some larger whole, or gestures toward that whole; it may also be thought of as akin to a Gothic *ruin*, like the ruins of medieval abbeys that are spread across England and that first attracted tourists and aesthetic attention in the Romantic era. Why did people come to like looking at architectural ruins—and then, correspondingly, writing and reading fragment poems? In general, the notion is that their very incompleteness allows the *imagination* to roam over them: how did such an edifice once look? What world had it been part of? Or of a poem such as Coleridge's—what larger story does it involve? What are the possibilities for completing it? Can its *finitude* even be imagined: or does its incompleteness gesture toward the infinite, that which cannot be totalized? In the specific case of "Christabel," some critics have argued that the poem would, paradoxically, be ruined by any determinate ending, because the very *action* such an ending would require—be it Geraldine's final triumph, or her defeat—would break the poem's own spell, its *enactment* of the very sort of paralysis and passivity it depicts in the enchanted Christabel.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) doesn't have a medieval setting—its narrative culminates, rather, in 1797, the year of Mary's own birth. But it is a "Gothic" novel in a somewhat extended sense: in the sense that, as M.H. Abrams remarks (*Glossary of Literary Terms*), it "develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom or terror, represents events which

are uncanny, or macabre, or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states.” In *Frankenstein*, there’s an uncanny symmetry in the creature’s monster’s relation to his creator, Victor Frankenstein: Victor hides away from his friends, his family, and his fiancée in order to turn corpses into living beings. The monster, in response, turns Victor’s friends, family, and bride into corpses. He does so precisely because Victor’s own solitary condition is forced upon him. Victor, that is, chooses to be lonely; the creature, by contrast, has no choice. Victor’s solitude is voluntary; the monster’s is enforced. And the two end up in a circle of vengeance that places them outside of society, outside of civilization: thus they finish their lives headed toward the North Pole, the ultimately solitary place, a place no one had in 1818 yet trod. Victor’s “self-centered seclusion,” to quote Percy Shelley on the “Alastor”-poet, has not only given birth to a creature who is the very “spirit of solitude,” but it is a solitude that takes revenge on its creator for his abandonment of domestic and social affections. In terms of the gothic genre we examined in this lecture, Victor is both the Faustian overreacher and the persecuting parent—the creature is at first like the persecuted son, but he then, violently, strikes back, leading this whole artificial and alienated “family” to its final destruction among the snows of a barren world.



Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley
(1797–1851)
by Richard Rothwell, ca. 1840

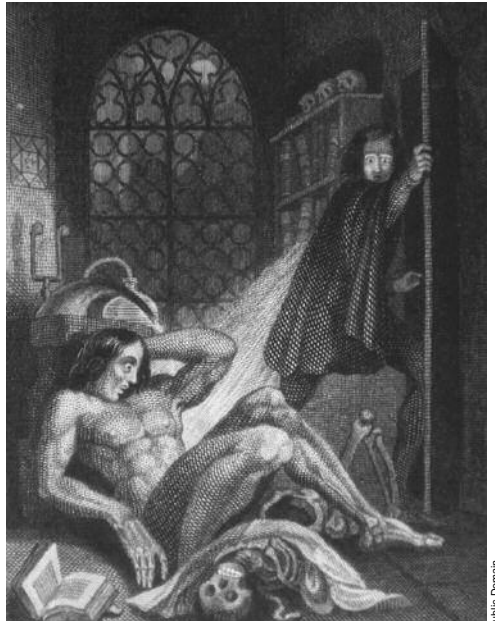


Illustration by Theodor von Holst from the frontispiece of an 1831 edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What characterized Gothic architecture?
2. How is *Frankenstein* a “Gothic” novel?

Suggested Reading

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. “Christabel.” *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2A. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. 2nd ed. Ed. Susan Wolfson. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2007.

Other Books of Interest

Cantor, Paul A. *Creature and Creator: Myth-Making and English Romanticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Holmes, Richard. *Coleridge: Darker Reflections, 1804–1834*. New York: Pantheon, 1998.

Mellor, Anne K. *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Lecture 12: Keats's (Mock-)Gothic Romances

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are John Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2A, 3rd ed.



Keats objected to Byron's last great poem, "Don Juan," in these terms: "the tendency of Byron's poetry is based on a paltry originality, that of being new by making solemn things gay and gay things solemn." Ironically, this tactic of making solemn things gay or humorous may be found in certain romance poems and ballads that Keats wrote in his brief poetic maturity—albeit Keats's humor, his kidding around with generic expectations, is not as blatant as Lord Byron's. Keats's ironic treatment of *gothic romance* is, we may say, in a "finer tone" than Byron's ironies, in "Don Juan," at the expense of the classical epic. But when we come to look closely at Keats's poems with gothic settings—"The Eve of St. Agnes" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"—we may be hard pressed, in the end, as to whether to label these poems gothic or *mock-gothic*: mock-gothic in the sense of gently poking fun at gothic and romance conventions.

The truly remarkable things about Keats were both his sheer productivity, and the quality of his production, during the three or so years of his full-time career of poetry; three years is *not* a very long career, and yet Keats managed to produce far more and far better poetry in that span than most other poets, even talented poets, could accomplish in much longer lifetimes. Still more impressive is this: Keats produced his most impressive poems in his last year of writing, 1819—it seems that in this *annus mirabilis* (or "marvelous year") that Keats was just reaching his stride as a mature poet. In a way, Keats's life seems a Romantic fragment or ruin, much like Coleridge's "Christabel," and readers have often wondered what larger poetic whole it might have portended had Keats not died so tragically young.



John Keats
by William Hilton, ca. 1822
(after Joseph Severn)

“Christabel” is a useful poem to recall here for yet another reason: in the winter months of 1819, among the first poems Keats wrote were two “gothic” poems, set in the middle ages and full of magic or at least imagined magic: first, “The Eve of St. Agnes,” a narrative poem in Spenserian stanzas, and second, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” a ballad.

In January of 1819, Keats wrote in a mere nine to ten days this narrative poem of 378 lines in forty-two highly crafted stanzas. The poem is set in what seems to be the late Middle Ages, in a Gothic castle or other large manor house, complete with hidden passages and cobwebs. The action of the poem occurs, significantly, on the eve of St. Agnes Day—St. Agnes Day is January 21; legend has it that on St. Agnes Eve, virtuous young girls who perform the proper rituals may dream of their future husbands. In Keats’s poem, the virtuous young girl is named Madeline; there is a dance taking place at the castle, full of music and revelry, but Madeline retires early from the festivities in order to undress, lie down on her bed, sleep, and dream of her future husband. But she’s tricked by her ardent admirer, a young man named Porphyro, who gains access to her bed-chamber—and stealing in upon her, has sex with her while she’s still half asleep, or suspended between waking and dreaming. That is to say, Madeline may admit Porphyro into her bed thinking him a figure in a dream—but after it’s all over, she recognizes that she’s had sex with a flesh-and-blood lover. Fortunately, however, she seems to have loved Porphyro all along, and escapes with him into the night—and there the poem abruptly ends.

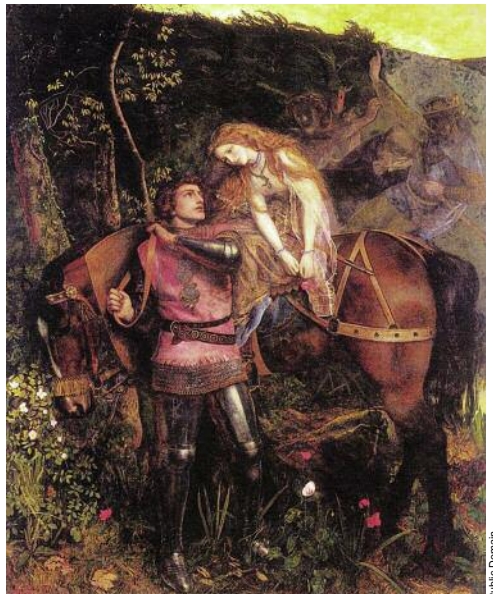
Before that ending, however, Porphyro describes himself to Madeline as “a famished pilgrim—saved by miracle”; here is where the irony of the poem’s romance becomes all too apparent. Porphyro isn’t a holy pilgrim



Madeline Undressing
(from “The Eve of St. Agnes”)
by Sir John Everett Millais, 1863

and he hasn't been saved by a miracle; rather, he got what he wanted by deception and stratagem, by "hood-winking" Madeline. And if Madeline was so easy to be deceived, it's because her head was turned by superstition and romance, by the expectation and desire of finding a dream or ideal lover. Is "The Eve of St. Agnes," then, a *criticism* of the romance form? Of the sort of deceptions and self-deceptions it enables? And finally, how *seriously* does Keats himself take his romance? The poem's curiously abrupt ending seems to throw the wish-fulfillment of the romance form into question: Porphyro and Madeline just run away into the night, "into the storm," and that's that. We're made aware that we're listening to a fairy tale—although the final image of what we're left with is death, the passing away of the gothic household Madeline has left behind.

We turn finally to another Keats poem, one that is a version of the poem that Porphyro sings to Madeline in her waking "dream": "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," or the "beautiful lady without mercy." The title of this poem is taken from an actual medieval poem, in which to be "without mercy" means that the lady refuses to satisfy her lover's desire; she refuses to grant sexual favors in exchange for gifts and service. Of course, in "The Eve of St. Agnes" Madeline does not so refuse her lover. But Keats's ballad "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," written shortly after "St. Agnes," concerns a woman who not only refuses to grant satisfaction—but who appears, in some gothic-vampiric way, to have sucked out her lovers' souls. The question, however, is this: are we to take the gothic element of this poem any more seriously than we take the gothic romance of "St. Agnes"? There's another way to see this poem, first suggested by the critic Jack Stillingner, in which the poem's seemingly victimized knight-at-arms, like Madeline in "St. Agnes," is a "hood-winked dreamer," awoken from a dream or visionary meeting with la belle dame, but still vainly hoping for a second meeting. It is his vision, then—and his gothic superstition—that has cut him off from the real world, the fruitful world: the world in which granaries are full, people look ahead and prepare. According to this reading, the knight is as much to be criticized as he is to be pitied, and Keats's ballad less a straight gothic romance than a mock-gothic send-up of the form. Yet if Keats is, to some degree, "making solemn things gay" here, he does so with a subtlety, an ambiguity, that has left his readers still guessing after nearly two hundred years.



La Belle Dame Sans Merci
by Arthur Hughes, 1863

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why did Keats object to Byron's "Don Juan"?
2. What is the irony of the romance in "The Eve of St. Agnes"?

Suggested Reading

Keats, John. "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."
The Longman Anthology of British Literature. Vol. 2A. 3rd ed. New York:
Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Henderson, Andrea K. *Romanticism and the Painful Pleasures of Modern Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 243–54.

Keats, John. *Keats's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Jeffrey N. Cox. New York:
W.W. Norton & Co., 2009.

Stillinger, Jack. "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes.'" *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1971.

Lecture 13: Keats's Great Odes

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "To Autumn" in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2A, 3rd ed.



Keats wrote his five or six "great odes" (not all counts include "Ode to Indolence") between April and September of 1819; in order, they are "Ode to Psyche," "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to Melancholy," "Ode on Indolence," and "To Autumn." All but "Ode on Indolence," left unpublished

by Keats, were published in 1820, in Keats's third and final volume of poems, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*. In this lecture, I focus on four of Keats's odes, "To Melancholy," "To a Nightingale," "On a Grecian Urn," and "To Autumn." The overarching question of Keats's odes is this: what is the proper response, or the possible responses, to mutability, evanescence, and finally death? And secondarily—in what ways can the imaginative arts respond to transience and death? Can they in any sense transcend death—or otherwise help one accept it?

In "Ode to Melancholy," melancholy is produced by the experience of transience, of passing pleasure, passing things—of, finally, death; and in this ode, Keats asks us to embrace melancholy, along with the transience that gives rise to it. This is a poem about *seeking* the experience, the sensation, of melancholy: about *wanting* to be like the knight-in-arms of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." And the proper route toward melancholy or depression, for those who want to taste it, lies through intense sensual pleasure and expectation of pleasure (again like the knight-at-arms). Pleasure leads to pain in that pleasures fade, and the object of desire sooner or later ceases to please; satiety and disgust creep in; and soon, where there had been pleasure, there remains only the dull pain of melancholy.

By contrast, the speaker's aim in "Ode to a Nightingale" is to escape his melancholy by empathizing with the bird, losing himself in the bird's song. The speaker's attempted means of empathizing, however, all prove ineffective: these means are, successively, wine (intoxication); the poetic imagination; and, finally, death (as an extinction of specifically *human* consciousness). The speaker *can't*, in the end, become one with the bird; he can't escape his own human melancholy in the bird's song. The poem is also a meditation on the nature of art, as many of the odes are; in this case the dominant sense is

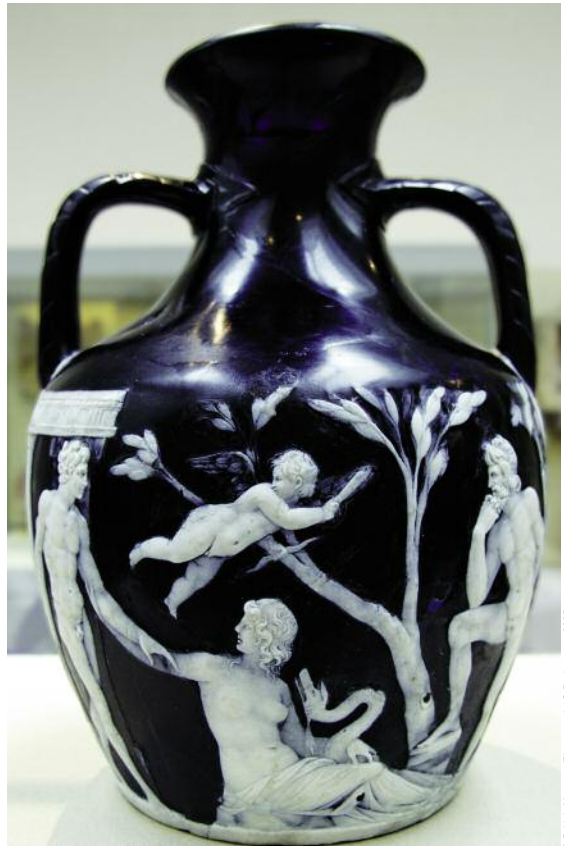


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the ear. The nightingale's song is vocal without verbal content—it represents an art solely of sensation, not of thought.

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn” the model for art is not aural but rather visual: the poem describes a pictorial representation extended in space around a cylindrical urn. (By “urn,” Keats appears to mean “vase” or pottery vessel in general—Greek vases came in many shapes and sizes, as they were designed for many purposes: for example, storing oil or wine, or mixing wine with water.) The main theme or question of this poem is whether human transience can be transcended in visual art, and/or a poetry that responds to it. For visual art is—in a way that poetry is not, but might aspire to be—*static*; as such, it seems to offer a counterpoint to the incessant movement and transience of life.

Finally, in “To Autumn,” the response to transience is no longer melancholy, but rather calm, sensual acceptance. Keats forsakes cloudy Melancholy, a forlorn divinity, for personified Autumn. Autumn is another goddess of transience, but she is not the goddess of death; rather, she is a goddess who is the close bosom-friend of the giver of life, Apollo-Sun. In “To Autumn,” Keats chooses life—although that, paradoxically, means accepting death, and in large part his own death: by the time he wrote the poem Keats knew he was dying of the same disease, tuberculosis, that had already taken his mother and brother. But the amazing thing about “To Autumn” is the poet's ability to look death in the eye—his own death, without any sort of religious consolation—and craft from this terrifying insight a poem of calm acceptance and exultation in cycles of growth, fruition, and decay.



Side A of the cameo-glass
Portland Vase

The vase was believed to have been made in Italy, ca. 5–25 AD.

The Portland Vase is from the collection of the dukes of Portland, purchased with the aid of a bequest from James Rose Vallentin in 1945, and is displayed at the British Museum, London.

© British Museum/Photograph © P. Jarrold, 2007

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are the overarching questions of Keats's odes?
2. What are the models of art addressed in Keats's odes?

Suggested Reading

Keats, John. "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "To Autumn." *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2A. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Bate, Walter Jackson. *John Keats*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963.

Lecture 14:
Byron's Comic Epic:
"Don Juan"

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Lord Byron's "Don Juan" in *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*, vol. 2A, 3rd ed.



As we come to the end of our course, you may be feeling the need for a bit of comic relief. There's been a fair amount of *dying* in the past few lectures: we've just seen John Keats in his great odes reconcile himself to his own death; Shelley, who wrote a fine elegy for Keats, the poem "Adonais," outlived Keats by only sixteen months. And Byron, we all know, would die just a few years later in Greece, where he was involved in the Greek war of independence. Fortunately for us, Byron, in the five years before his death, unleashed his humorous side, serially publishing sixteen cantos of his potentially endless comic masterpiece, "Don Juan." It is not only Byron's comic masterpiece, but the comic masterpiece of the Romantic era. This lecture looks closely at Canto I of "Don Juan," in which Byron narrates Juan's education, his first love (to a married woman), and the aftermath of that love. I conclude with some general reflections on the Romantic poets and their continued relevance to our world.

By the end of 1817, Byron had grown increasingly disenchanted with not only the Byronic hero he had created, but with most of what he considered the innovative—we would say "Romantic"—poetry of his age, writing to his publisher John Murray, "With regard to poetry in general, I am convinced, the more I think of it, that . . . *all* of us—Scott, Southey, Wordsworth . . . I—are all in the wrong, one as much as another; that we are upon a wrong revolutionary poetical system, or systems . . . I am the more confirmed in this by having lately gone over some of our classics, particularly *Pope*." Byron refers to Alexander Pope, who died in 1744, the reigning genius of earlier eighteenth-century poetry, master of the poetic couplet, and expert at both light and biting satire. For just a taste of Pope's comic wit, consider these lines in praise of Hampton Court Palace and Queen Anne, the sovereign of the three realms of England, Wales, and Scotland: "Here thou, Great *Anna!* whom three Realms obey, / Dost sometimes Counsel take—and sometimes *Tea*." "Tay" was indeed a standard pronunciation of "tea" at the time; but still there's something brilliant about this "obey/tay" rhyme: a brilliance that may be partly accounted for by the asymmetry of iambic "obey" with the single stressed "tay." Of course the couplet is also funny for yoking "counsel or sage advice" and "tay" with the single verb "take." These are some of the comic techniques Byron would glean from Pope in composing "Don Juan"—and at the end of Canto I, Byron jocularly announces his new "poetical commandments":

Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;
Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey;
Because the first is craz'd beyond all hope,
The second drunk, the third so quaint and moutheys. (stanza 205)

These lines are amusing, first of all, for taking shrewd aim at some of our first-generation Romantic friends; but what caps them are the great comic rhyme of “Southey” and “mouthey.” What can we say of the rhyme? Note first of all that it’s a “double rhyme,” consisting of two syllables; it’s also a *forced rhyme*, because it requires a mistreatment of words: there *is* no word, “mouthey.” Once we hear “mouthey,” however, we pretty much understand what it means: someone who runs at the mouth, someone who’s wordy or a bore.

Byron begins his tale, introducing us to his hero, a young Don Juan, a name which he makes us pronounce with two syllables, “Ju-an,” to rhyme with “true one” and “new one.” (Byron needed to give the name an English pronunciation, because “Juan” in Spanish pronunciation doesn’t *rhyme* with much, if anything, in English.) Byron adapts Juan in another, more substantial way: the Don Juan of Spanish legend was a heartless rake and the devil’s own disciple, ending his career by being dragged down to hell for his crimes—that’s how he ends up in most plays and pantomimes of the eighteenth century, as well as in Mozart’s brilliant opera *Don Giovanni*, “Giovanni” being the Italian form of “Juan.” Byron, ironically, transforms Juan into a well-meaning naïf, an innocent creature controlled by circumstances beyond his control. He ends up in a few bedrooms as Byron’s epic unfolds—but it’s never really his intention, and he never means anyone any harm.

Byron writes “Don Juan” in the verse form called in Italian *ottava rima*—it’s the standard verse form of the Italian Renaissance epic, most notably Ariosto’s comic epic, “Orlando Furioso.” It is an eight-line stanza written for the most part in deca-syllabic lines (ten syllables to the line), though Byron freely goes up to eleven or twelve syllables for effect; its rhyme scheme is *abababcc*. Byron typically reserves his funniest rhyme, often a *forced rhyme*, for the final couplet—a couplet that often deflates whatever drama or seriousness has been built up in the stanza up to that point.



Illustration from an early edition of “Don Juan” printed in London (artist unknown).

Canto I, Stanza XCII

He thought about himself, and the whole earth,
Of man the wonderful, and of the stars,
And how the deuce they ever could have birth;
And then he thought of earthquakes, and of wars,
How many miles the moon might have in girth,
Of air-balloons, and of the many bars
To perfect knowledge of the boundless skies;—
And then he thought of Donna Julia’s eyes.

Toward the end of Canto I (stanzas 213 to 215), Byron speaks to us in his own person and complains that at thirty years old (his age as he wrote these lines) the world lacks the freshness it once had for him, that it lacks “emotions beautiful and new”—and it’s here that Byron recalls us to the central Romantic theme with which we began this course. Romantic poetry is, first and foremost, about how we see or perceive the world—it’s about how imagination, intuition, and memory shape our perceptions. The loss of imaginative vision or freshness has also been a major theme of the poems we’ve read: Wordsworth, whom Byron makes fun of, had earlier complained, when he himself was about thirty-two, that the world lacks the visionary gleam it seemed to have when he was a child (“Intimations Ode”). The loss of vision and joy is also lamented by Shelley in “Alastor,” and by Coleridge in a poem we haven’t had time to look at, but that I urge you to read: his great “Dejection: An Ode.” Yet as a counterpoint to a luster loss, each poet finds some generous recompense: for Wordsworth, it’s human sympathy and philosophical tranquility; for Shelley it’s the continued hope for the political and perceptual transformation of mankind; for Byron, it’s a dogged faith in political liberalism—but the specifically *poetic* recompense he’s found for his waning sensibility is, as he put it, “a deal of judgment,” however it “found a lodgment.” It’s this judgment that makes him the witty and judicious poet of “Don Juan,” his greatest poem.



The Finding of Don Juan by Haidee
by Ford Madox Brown, 1878

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why did Byron think he was “in the wrong” by 1817?
2. Why did Byron pronounce “Juan” with two syllables?

Suggested Reading

Byron, Lord. “Don Juan, Canto 1.” *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2A. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Other Books of Interest

Byron, Lord. *Byron’s Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Alice Levine. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010.

Kroeber, Karl, and Gene W. Ruoff, eds. *Romantic Poetry: Recent Revisionary Criticism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Lecture 1

Assonance: the repetition of middle vowel sounds: for example, “sound” and “profound.”

Lecture 5

Polyptoton: repetition of words from the same root but with different endings—for example, Coleridge’s line, “tranquil [l] muse upon tranquility” (“The Eolian Harp”).

Reverie: a state of abstracted musing, day-dreaming.

Lecture 9

Spenserian stanza: a nine-line stanza with the rhyme scheme, *ababbcbcc*; the first eight lines are in iambic pentameter, while the ninth and final line is an *alexandrine*, or single line of iambic hexameter (twelve syllables).

Lecture 10

Terza rima: a continuous succession of tercets (three-line stanzas) rhyming *aba, bcb, cdc*, and so on. The stanza of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, employed by Shelley in “Ode to the West Wind” and other poems.

Lecture 12

spondee: a poetic foot that has two accented syllables in it. “GO HOME” is, in idiomatic English, a spondee; “repent” an iamb; “worship” a trochee.

alliteration: repetition of an initial sound, usually of a consonant or cluster—for example, in Keats’s “The Eve of St. Agnes,” stanza 1, line 9: “**P**ast the sweet Virgin’s picture, while his **p**raye**r** he saith.”

Lecture 13

ekphrasis (or *ekphrasis*): from antiquity onwards, a type of rhetorical exercise taking the form of a verbal description of a work of visual art.

Lecture 14

forced rhyme: a rhyme that requires a mistreatment of words, or inventing a new word for the sake of the rhyme, as in Byron’s “Southey/mouthey” or “intellectual/hen-pecked-you-all.”

ottava rima: the standard verse form of the Italian Renaissance epic, most notably Ariosto’s comic epic, “Orlando Furioso.” It is an eight-line stanza rhyming *abababcc*, written for the most part in deca-syllabic lines (ten syllables to the line), though Byron freely goes up to eleven or twelve syllables for effect.

The Main Texts for This Course:

The Longman Anthology of British Literature. Vol. 2A. *The Romantics and Their Contemporaries*. Eds. Susan Wolfson and Peter Mannning. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Alternative text: *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume D: The Romantic Period*. 8th ed. Eds. Stephen Greenblatt, Deidre Shauna Lynch, and Jack Stillinger. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005.

Suggested Readings:

Blake, William. "Songs of Experience" and "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2A. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

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Byron, Lord. "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, Canto I." *Byron's Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Alice Levine. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2010.

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Manning, Peter J., and Susan J. Wolfson. "The Romantics and Their Contemporaries." *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 2. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2006.

Suggested Readings (continued):

McGuirk, Carol, ed. *Robert Burns: Selected Poems*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1993.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. "Julian and Maddalo, a Conversation," "Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude," and "Ode to the West Wind." *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Neil Fraistat and Donald H. Reiman. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002.

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Marchand, Leslie A. *Byron: A Portrait*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

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Stillinger, Jack. "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes.'" *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1971.

Wordsworth, Jonathan, Michael C. Jaye, and Robert Woof. *William Wordsworth and the Age of English Romanticism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987.

Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*. Eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979.

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These books are available online through www.modernscholar.com or by calling Recorded Books at 1-800-636-3399.

Articles of Interest:

Potkay, Adam. "Wordsworth and the Ethics of Things." *PMLA* (Publications of the Modern Language Association of America). Vol. 123. No. 2. March 2008, pp. 390–404.

Suggested Listening on Robert Burns and the Ballad Tradition:

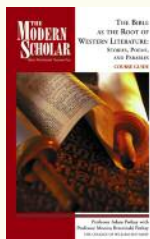
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